**The Beast**

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# The Beast

by Hannibalistic

Summary

A recent string of gruesome murders leaves FBI agent Will Graham and his team searching for logical answers, but details leave him stumped for results until one fateful meeting leaves him utterly disturbed, yet unequivocally curious.

# Slashing Factors

A recent string of gruesome murders has left the old town of Baltimore and surrounding areas on their toes. Deep in the woods, bodies were beginning to pile up. Bodies of torn cadavers as if an animal had tore them to shreds. Hunters and fisherman, campers and hikers, all of them slain beyond recognition. Their blood and body parts frozen, splatted yards away deep into the woods. Soon, the town began to talk of a beast. A beast that stood ten feet tall, with a black humanoid body, sprawling moonlit antlers, and milky white eyes. Some said if you stayed out at night, and sat in the middle of the woods without moving, you could hear the wind stop, the birds leave, and the bugs go quiet. Then, in the darkness as your eyes begin to adjust, you could hear the sound of hoofs against the brittle dead leaves as it slowly stalked towards you, it's hunger immeasurable. You wouldn't know where it lurks under the moon, but you'll know, he's there.

Everyone on the countryside began to lock themselves inside, too scared to dare step out of their homes when the moon turned over the sun. Children were forbidden to play in the woods, even during the day. The deaths became so alarming that a curfew was issued by the city to stay indoors after 10:00pm, only skeptical teenagers dared to venture outside, sometimes with deadly consequences.

However, despite the city being locked down until the FBI could track, hunt, and kill whatever it was. Still despite how the myth began to grow, one man remained skeptical, and that man was Will Graham.

Special Agent Will Graham lived in the middle of nowhere. He was surrounded by an area of thick, boney woods at every turn. He grew up living in rural places hunting and fishing for a long as he could remember. Nothing unexpected had ever happened. Nothing out of the ordinary or creepy. It was just nature. Will hypothesized that he was in the perfect area for whatever this myth was to catch him, yet it hadn't. Not yet.

Will was a reclusive man. His home was a small cabin like house. He enjoyed the simple life of living off of canned food with his five dogs and going on daily and nightly walks. Despite living only few miles away the most recent case, he continued his walks. Will was with the FBI on occasional cases, and this was just the same. The FBI was stumped for answer, and so they brought him.

Will was exposed to the horrific crime scene, analyzing the gore and wound patterns of whatever remained of the victim. Will had seen what this thing was capable of, and he was sure it was not an animal. However, his skeptic mind pushed him to believe reason. He still took his dogs out for a morning walk, he still went fishing in the afternoon, and he still occasionally took strolls in the woods during nightfall. Only now, he did carry a gun.

"Will." A voice echoed behind him. The man jumped and turned around, seeing Jack Crawford standing behind him, his hands in his pockets as he studied Will carefully. "You ok?" He asked.

“I just...I was just thinking.” Will blinked a few times, slowly coming back into reality as he was staring off into the distance.

It was winter, heavy snow had fallen all around leaving everything in a icy white blanket. The trees were dull and dark, their branch’s sprawling out like claws as they loomed over the people crowded around as if they were unwelcome guests.

“Come take a look at this.” Jack said

Will followed Jack over to the dreaded scene.

“Gored just like the others, stomach torn open and everything.” Beverly, part of the forensics team, sighed. She was sick of seeing all these mounds of flesh dropping like flies.

As Will got closer, he put his hand up to his nose, holding back a gag as the rancid smell reached him.

“The kidney is missing, and the rifle was fired.” She called out, looking up at Jack and Will as her hand squelched inside the remains of man’s chest cavity. “Whatever took it probably ate it.”

“Couldn’t it just be a bear?” Jimmy asked with a irritated groan as he picked up the rifle and looked it over.

“No,” Will murmured, “a bear doesn’t leave half of it’s food behind, let alone throw it around like a monkey.” His eyes fixed around the woods. “Wolves—....Wolves do...sometimes. It’s rare that it happens, but...it can. If it’s a pack” He spoke quietly, almost as if he was speaking to himself. He dropped his hand from his nose, “but they don’t do this.” Will gestured to a large blood stain on the tree, it was almost shaped like hand. They all turned, staring at the tree where the wood was dark. A shiver ran through the agents. “I’m telling you, animal’s aren’t this *selective* about what parts they eat.”

Will rubbed his forehead as he started getting flustered. It had been almost a full month since the killings had start, and they couldn’t pin-point anything. Jack was pressuring him, and the media was pressuring Jack. They openly told the press it must’ve been a rabid pack of wolves that moved in, but no one was buying it and just because they stuck a label to it didn’t mean the killing stopped.

“They don’t care about kidneys or lungs or livers. A-And they wouldn’t go after people. They’re more afraid of us than we are of them.”

”You know, I think we should stick to the rabid animal bit.” Jimmy spoke up as he placed a partial rib cage into a bag.

“You said they’re selective with what they take?” Jack asked as he continued to start as the bloody print.

”What ever it is, its deliberately tearing into the body to get to the essential organs...presumably eat them.”

”So maybe it’s not an animal...” Brian Zeller pointed out as he examined the deep slashes in half of a ribcage.

Everyone paused except for Will and turned to the forensic pathologist. ”What?” Jack said with a confused expression.

“I don’t know.” He shrugged, “You hear the rumors? Somebody said they saw some humanoid being in the woods. Like a…like a man.”

Will chuckled bitterly: “What? So some mythical creature’s wandering the woods?” He scoffed, “You’ve been reading too many Freddie Lounds articles.”

“What if it is a person?” Jack spoke up, “Or a group of people.” Will turned to Jack with a confused expression. He opened his mouth to object, but then shut it as he thought.

“Humans...do kill for sport, but...this amount of gore? It’s...savagery.”

”Ok, but you said it yourself, it’s not a bear, you don’t think it’s wolves, *and* It’s picking out all the organs we humans eat!” Brian declared, his hands up in the air.

“We’ve seen some shit, Will, I wouldn’t put it below people.” Jack murmured.

“I’m telling you, that would explain the removal of the organs.” Brian added, “They tear the flesh on the chest to get to the ribs, break open the rib cage, and remove the organs to share them with the others. Could be a cannibal cult.” He suggested mindlessly.

“Oh come on, a cult? Are you out of your mind?” Jimmy asked with his bloody hands on his hips, “I told you to stop reading Freddie Lounds, he got that right out of her page.”

”I did not!”

”There’s been no reports of cult activity.” Will said shortly.

“Not that we know of.” Jack countered.

“Then where did they come from?” Will asked, “Are they people in the city? Are they outsiders? There would be a way to trace them, it wouldn’t be out of the blue like this. They would have killed elsewhere.”

”Well, one thing’s for sure,” Beverly stood up, “It’s probably a big ass bear, or not an animal. We ruled out other animals last week, I don’t know why we keep clinging to it. We’re going in circles.”

”A-Actually it could be. Someone could have...trained an animal to do this sort of thing.” Will corrected.

”And then he carefully picked out the organs?” Beverley asked. “Or-or maybe this dude trained a bear yeah? A big, fat, burly bear.

Brian chuckled boastfully as he shook his head. ”No, ann animal would have had some internal damage other than just the removal of the organs. Nothing else was damaged when they reached the inside. It’s like cracking a crab leg open.”

”Then how do we explain the scratches?” Will pointed out, “No amount of nail filing could do this sort of damage.”

Jack sighed.”Well, it’s fuckin’ something.” He crossed his arms. “We’re gonna get a lot of heat if we don’t come up with something else, and blaming it on some mythical creature wont help us.”

Taking the remaining parts of the unknown body, they had to wrap up the scene. They needed to identify who the body was.

Will couldn’t profile anything about this thing. It didn’t *seem human*, but it also had human characteristics. He just couldn’t bring himself to believe a human was capable of this amount of damage.

He stayed for the autopsy, watching them piece things back together. Although it was clear what happened. Will was trying to wrap his head around what it could be, however no animal came to mind. No animal truly came to mind. He *had* to think of people now. Someone so messed up in the head that they could go off and do this sort of thing. Not only that, but that’s had to rejoin society after. Maybe they were walking the streets carrying groceries, chatting with neighbors and smiling like anyone else. But they were *not* human to Will. Not in any moral sense.

He tried to imagine himself killing the man that he could imagine. Piece together the tufts of short brown hair and plaid shirt. What would he do? Get the first person he saw? Or wait for a better, bulky elk. It was night, it had to be. He stalked the man through the woods, the snow concealing the footsteps. The man must’ve felt it, maybe even seen it. He fired the gun in a loud clap that would echo nowhere. Maybe it was injured, or maybe he missed. Maybe it got him right as he fired. That was animalistic.

Will decided there was nothing else he could do except research something, anything. Once he got home the reluctant researched In cannibals began.

Will didn’t find anything that really fit the profile. He found articles about “uncivilized” cannibalistic tribes that would slice then devour their victims insides. He found cannibalistic serial killers that would carefully remove the organs and cook them. One tag, however caught his attention. Folklore. Humoring the idea, he clicked.

Soon, Will found himself on Freddie Lounds’s article about the murders, the most recent one. He felt his stomach flip flop at the idea of using Freddie as a way to gauge what it could and could not be, but it was his last resort. It talked about a the lengthy shadowy figure that roamed the woods. Black antlers and white, mesmerizing eyes. Some people called it a demon, other’s called it a fairy, but one description that caught Will’s attention. Two words in a starting paragraph. The Wendigo. He didn’t bother reading about what she had to say about it, and instead researched it himself.

The “Wendigo” had many origins, some said it started from Native American legends, other’s believed it came from the depths of hell, both seemed pretty outlandish for an FBI agent to go off of. The theory about the mythical beings suggested that the creatures were originally humans who had turned into Wendigos after consuming human flesh either out of desempatar or gluttony.

Will leaned back in his chair, his eyes stinging and strained from the amount of blue light emanating his laptop screen. He sighed and rubbed his eyes tiredly, feeling stupid for even considering a Freddie Lounds article seriously, let alone a mythical folk tale.

Buster, one of his small dogs, suddenly barked at the door. Will looked over, seeing that all of his dogs were uncharacteristically looking up at the door. Their fur was raised and their tails up, pointing straight as a line. Will looked at all of them curiously and slowly stood up before walking to the door carefully. He glanced outside. The sun was going down, and the sky was starting to break out into a vibrant, golden orange. Will scanned the horizon, not seeing anything That would have startled his dogs.

”What’s the matter?” He mumbled to them, squinting his eyes. Will’s dogs never barked for anything, let alone displayed blatant defensive behavior out of the blue. He opened the door, unaware that Buster had run up between his legs, bolting out the door and starting to head into the woods as he barked viciously.

“Hey! No! Buster! Get— Goddamn it.” Will grabbed his coat and riffle before he took off after Buster, listening for his aggressive and incessant barking.

“Buster!” He called, still tugging on the rest of his coat.

Will entered into the woods, following the little foot prints Buster left behind. He called for his dog, whistling and clapping his hands, but the barking had stopped after a few minutes.

“Where the hell did you go?” He breathed. “Buster!” he went deeper into the woods, his breath turning to fog as he huffed. He stopped, cupping his hands around his mouth. “BUSTER!” His voice echoed through the woods between the eerie trees, but nothing.

Will stood for a while, slowly spinning in a circle as he waited for something, anything. In the distance, he could hear a sudden bark. One bark. Will raised his brows, and started to quickly walk towards the sound, his feet sinking in the snow. He whistled as he hurried after, trying to get his dog to make another sound. Another bark came, but somehow it sounded further away. It kept traveling deeper into the thicket of the woods. Still, will wasn’t about to give up, it was cold out. Buster would probably freeze to death when the sun went down. Will held himself as it started to get colder, the darkness robbing him of any remaining warmth. The wind picked up slightly, rustling the scarce amount of leaves on the trees around him.

Will heard the bark again, and grunted when it was still far off. He continued to jog through the woods, stumbling a little as the dead brush got tangled beneath his feet. He stepped over a large log, and when he hit the ground on the other side, the crack of the twigs beneath him echoed around him. In that moment he realized everything was dead quiet. There was no wind, no birds, no bugs, not even the trees dared to move. It was just the sound of his own

heartbeat and breathing in his ears. The more he stood, the more Will found the stillness unnerving. It was as if something had scared off all of the wildlife.

He couldn't hear Buster anymore either.

The hair on the back of his neck stood up, realizing how eerie it was. This was not normal. He proceeded with caution, moving slowly through the woods, whispering his beloved dog's name.

There was another bark, and Will looked around. For the first time he realized something about it was...off. It sounded like Buster, almost perfectly, but the tone was just...not right. Something didn't sit right inside of Will's stomach. He stopped moving, the bark was definitely closer now, and the more Will replayed the sound in his head, the more he realized it didn't even sound like a proper dog. It was robotic in nature, lacking any sort of inflection. He felt a chill run down his spine. His heart jolted at the revelation that something or someone was making the sound of his dog in the woods, but he shook his head and pushed it out of his mind, he needed to find Buster.

Will continued walking, this time more slowly. He made sure he made as little noise as possible as he traversed through the thickening woods. The sun was completely gone, leaving him in total darkness. He reached into his coat, pulling out a flashlight that he turned on, slapping it on its head to get it to flicker to life. he slowly began to see a clearing up ahead. An opening in the woods. He quickened his pace, already creeped out by the trees that started to make him feel as if they were watching him. He approached the clearing quickly, moving a branch out of his face as he stepped out of the woods, and saw his dog, Buster standing in the center.

# The Wendigo

Buster was standing in the middle of the clearing sniffing at something. A relief washed over Will as he realized it was Buster after all. He felt silly for even letting those stories get to him.

He walked over to Buster, going to pick him up before he realized what his dog was sniffing at. It was a deer's corpse and it looked very familiar. The deer was gored, its ribs torn open, fur and flesh strewn about. Will hesitated a the wind picked up slightly. He bent down, sticking his hand into the blood to move the punctured lungs away. Then, he pushed the intestines to the side. It's heart and liver were missing.

Will's own heart jump into his throat as he heard a bark from directly behind him, coming from the woods. It was the same as before, a robotic, warbled bark from the distance. A chill shivered through the very core of his being. He didn't move, only hearing Buster growl for beside him.

Will's mouth was dry, he couldn't muster up enough courage to turn around. He slowly reached for his gun, only to realize he hadn't taken it with him. Will closed his eyes, trying to keep his cool as he picked up Buster carefully and stood up. There was a crack from the tree line, and Will held his breath as he turned around sharply. His flashlight aimed in the direction of the sound, but through the darkness he couldn't see anything.

Will continued to stay still. He could feel where the thing was, it's presences very prominent as if the thing wanted Will to know it was there. He could feel it circling him, sizing him up, but it was blending with the trees. Another crack came from his side as he turned quickly, nearing dropping his flashlight as it shook in his unsteady hand. Will swallowed hard trying to see through the streets.

"H-Hello?" He asked, slowly following the cracking sounds with his eyes. "I-I know you're there." He stepped back, "I…I know what you are!" The thing stopped moving. The woods went silent again.

Will swallowed dryly. "I'm...not going to hurt you." He called out, "I'm just...going to take my dog....a-and go." There was another crack as it got closer. Will took a few more steps back. "Is that ok?"

Will reached down and picked up his whimpering dog into his arms. He picked up his flashlight from the snow and lifted it back into the tree line. Two white orbs suddenly appeared, staring back at him from far up in the trees. Will felt his breath get stuck in his throat as Buster scrambled in his arms. The eyes got closer, dipping between trees before it paused. Will whimpered, and backed up further as Buster started to bark in his arms.

The creature was only a few yards away from him before it stepped into the clearing, letting the moonlight illuminate it's shape. The thing was a sleek matte black like cooled tar; it's antler standing tall and branching out from its head. It was tall, impossibly tall. Even from the distance Will's head tilted up to meet its milky eyes. Its body was awkward and fraile

looking, its ribs poked out from under its black skin, its shoulders were pointed and boney. Its jagged arms were impossibly long, nearly reaching its knees despite its legs already being tall. Every end of its body was sharp and jagged like its bones were threatening to poke out from its tough skin. Its expressionless face burnt holes into Will as its large head dipped down.

”O-Oh hell...” He said under his breath. He could feel his throat tighten with anxiety, his body breaking out in a sweat despite the whipping cold. It moved towards him carefully like an uncertain deer. Will could sense its uncertainty as it approached.

“Um...” Will tried to stay calm, but he could feel his heart beating out of his chest as he backed up, clutching Buster to his chest. “S-Stop! Don’t come nay closer! Stop!” He shouted.

It paused for a moment, its unblinking eyes staring at him. They both stood quietly before it turned its head slightly to the side, its eyes still fixed on Will. It stepped closer again.

”N-No, no! Stay!” Will barked in a shaky voice.

Still it moved closer, but never make a fast movement. It crouched down, long spindly claws touching the snow as it moved towards him like a monkey. Then when it stood only a few feet away, it stopped and cocked it’s head.

Will stared at it, his brows furrowed as he panted. Despite every inch of his body begging him to run, he felt like he was trapped in place, his muscles tensed so hard that it made him feel like stone. The longer he stood, however, the calmer he felt. His shoulders relaxed, and he swallowed.

”Hi?” Will breathed steadily.

It stared at him more and then tilted it’s chin up and opened it’s mouth.

“Hi?”

Will tensed, it sounded like a distortion of his own voice.He slowly started to crouch down, holding his free arm out as if it say, ‘I’m unarmed.’

The Wendigo slowly tilted it’s head, only a few feet between them. Will sat on his knees, still holding Buster who had gone quiet. They stared at one another for eternity, nothing moving or breathing. Will stared in fascination, his eyes running all over the creature but always ending up back at it’s eyes. They were eye-level with one another, both feeling a sense of curiosity.

The beast’s lips parted again, this time revealing it’s yellowed teeth that were stained red with blood. Will tensed again, leaning back as the creature leaned in toward’s his face. It smelt of rotting flesh and decay, making Will groan as he held his breath. The being was taking in Will’s features as Will turned his head away slightly, his face scrunched in fear. It raised it’s long hand and slowly brought it toward’s Will’s face. Will flinched back and shut his eyes reflexively. The being stopped.

“Hi?” It said again in his voice, but this time more efficiently.

Will slowly cracked open his eyes until he stopped wincing. The creature moving its hand again, and touched Will’s face as the human went cross-eyed looking at it. Its hand was ice cold and nearly took up the entirety of his head. Will didn’t move as his brows furrowed. He was now more fascinated with the creature as it grabbed at his face.

It tilted it’s head, and moved it’s hand down Will’s face to his neck, clutching it limply as Will tiled his head up. For some reason he didn’t feel that scared anymore as it held him. He knew he should be scared, it held his neck, but he was calm.

As Will exhaled it suddenly snatched his shoulder and pounced on him, knocking him onto his back as Buster squealed and ran out of his arms. The creatures loomed over him it’s mouth slightly ajar. The creature had it’s claws wrapped around his shoulders, pinning him down as it lower body hunched over

“Hello.” It said, this time a much different voice. It was lower, more human sounding—maybe it even had an accent. Will wondered if it was a victim’s voice or something else.

“H-Hello.” Will breathed softly. A moment of silence laid between him until a voice pierced the comfortable silence.

“Will!”

The voice scared the both of them, the creature snapped up at the sound of the voice, but still held Will’s shoulders. It looked towards the sound then back at Will. It got off of him, and before Will could sit up or breath, it was gone.

”Wait!” He called under his breath as he sat up quickly, the cold snow falling from his hair. His eyes scanned around desperately, but the only thing that remained was the swaying of a branch.

“Will?” He looked forward, seeing a flashlight breach the tree line before he suddenly recognized the voice. It was Alana. Will looked around for Buster as he started to get up.

“O-Over here!” He brushed his hair out of his face, trying to act like nothing happened as he stumbled towards Alana.

”What are you doing out here?” She asked as she saw him through the trees.

“B-Buster ran away, so I um...I-I followed after him.” He looked down to see Buster was by her feet, wagging his tail and panting. “Oh…”

She flashed her light behind him.

“What’s that?” She asked. Will turned around.

“A um...a-a dead deer” She walked towards him, brows furrowed nervously.

”What the fuck got that thing?”

”I…I don’t know.” Will lied as he rubbed his chin.

Alana looked around cautiously, scanning the tree line with her flashlight. It’s creepy out here...” she muttered.

The stood in silence for a moment, Alana’s flashlight searching before Will began to feel eyes on him again.

”W-We should go.” Will said hurriedly.

He walked past her, sweeping up Buster with him as they headed back to his house. His eyes were wide, his face drained of colour as Alana struggled to keep up with him. He reached his house, getting inside and letting Alana in with him. He set Buster down and took off his coat hanging it up as he cupped his cold hands over his mouth.

”Are you ok, Will?” Alana asked, turning off her flashlight as she tilted her head at her nervous peer.

”I-I’m um....I’m fine.” He lied.

“You look pale.” She mentioned.

”It’s the cold.” He lied again.

Alana paused, searching his face.

“Did you...see something, Will?”

He looked at her with surprise.

Knowing that she knew that something was wrong, he sighed and put his hands into his pockets.

”I um...felt something.”

Alana raised her brows.

“Like um...something was watching me.” Will walked over to his bed and sat down slowly, resting his elbows on his knees “When I was in the woods I could...hear Buster barking, a-and I followed after him.” Alana slowly walked over to him, “it felt like I wasn’t getting any closer to him. Like each time I heard a bark it was just as far away as before. Then it barked again and I realized that—” He shook his head, as if he was unsure he was believing what he said, “it wasn’t Buster it was...something *mimicking* my dog.”

Alana furrowed her brows.

“Mimicking?” She inquired.

”It sounded like him, but it sounded....off. Like it was being played on a-a recorder or something.”

”It could have just been him, Will. Are you sleeping well?”

”Alana. I heard a bark after I found Buster.” He punctuated.

“Couldn’t it of been another dog then?” She asked. “I mean you find dogs all the time out there.”

Will sighed as he took in Alana’s worried expression. He knew it wasn’t a dog, but if he told her anything, she’d report him to Jack for a psych-eval. Will sighed and nodded.

“I-I guess so.” Will chuckled nervously, “It could have been a dog.” Will nodded quickly, “I-I guess I’m just a little freaked out, you know?”

”Do you need to take a break? Like, from work?” Alana asked.

”No, no, I’m ok. I’m fine.” He said, “I just..maybe I need to get more sleep. The forest is always a little creepy though, right?” Alana smiled, but he could still see her uncertain expression. “I’m um— I’m ok.” He still had trouble swallowing. ”W-Why are you here anyway?”

”I was just passing by, getting off of work. I saw that your dogs were outside and your front door was open, I thought something had happened.”

Will smiled at her. “T-Thank you. I…I did forget to shut the door.”

”You should probably make your curfew earlier since you live in the woods, Will. I know our case hasn’t hit Virginia yet, but…it doesn’t hurt to be more careful. Especially if your dogs are all riled up…”

”Yeah, I guess I should.” He nodded. “I don’t know. It’s been a long day.

”you can certainly say that again. Jack’s got me working two cases— and I’m here worrying about you too.”

”You don’t have to be worried about me.” Will sighed.

“Well, that’s too bad.” She put a hand on his shoulder, “Get some sleep, Will.”

Will nodded again, noting that he would not be sleeping tonight.

After a bit more small talk and unwinding of nerves, Alana decided to leave Will much to his internal protest.

He watched her leave from his front porch, waving back to her as she started her car and roll out of his yard. He dropped his head, his eyes slowly turning back to the woods. He was half expecting the creature to be staring back at him. Will scanned the woods once more before he backed himself inside, locking both his doors. The weight of the night suddenly fell on him the moment the door locked. His legs felt like jelly as he put his hands on the door, letting out a frightened grunt. He turned around, panting as he slid onto the floor. He put his hand on his

chest as his heart pounded like a drum against his ribs. He closed his eyes, trying to calm his breathing.

”may I just imaged it…” he whispered to himself, “It’s just a nightmare…”

Will opened his eyes to his home, his dogs clamoring around as their collars jingled about. Winston was sat in front of him, his head cocked and ears raised slightly before he approached Will and sat beside him. Will sighed and gave him a good pet before he slowly got to his feet. He desperately pushed the memory of the woods into the back of his mind as he went into his kitchen and made himself a cup of coffee. He didn’t have time for mythical creatures.

Will remembered how cold the hand felt, its icy skin touching his own blood filled flesh; how its jet black skin glimmered in the moonlight. The creature was just as curious as he was. He wondered if they only reason it didn’t kill him was because it had just ate that deer. Maybe it was because Will didn’t resort to violence first, not that he could.

Will sat by his window, his eyes fixated out into the woods, and just as he watched the sun set, he watched the sun rise.

The poor agent didn’t realize how long he had actually been staring there until the sunlight burned his weary eyes. Will blinked a few times soreness creeping into his dry eyes. He was confused as to where he was for just a moment. Will grunted, dropping his stiff neck as he rubbed his eyes. His head pounded and his feet ached as he stood up slowly He stumbled over to his bed in exhaustion. Will pushed the palms of his hands into his eyes, letting out a low grunt as he could think of nothing more than to sleep. He dropped his heads and with weary and heavy lids, fell into a uncertain slumber.

# The Interview

Will woke up in the afternoon, the sound of birds chirping and his dogs's collars jingling. He took a deep breath and rolled onto his back, putting his hand on his forehead. His head was still throbbing as if someone had coiled barbed wire around it.

"Must've just been a dream." Will nodded to himself and sat up, still trying to convince himself what he saw wasn't real.

He stumbled to his kitchen, wolfing down two aspirins before putting his head under the sink to wash it down with water. turned off the faucet and whistled to his dogs as he walked to the front door. All of them got up and followed him to the door before he opened it. His dogs rushed out in a wave, barking and launching themselves off the porch.

Will stuck his hands into his pockets and walked down his porch. He looked off into the trees, his eyes landing on the area where he ran into the woods. A chill crawled up his back and through his body as flashes of that creature filled his head. The dead, white eyes stared back at him unmoving. He glanced back at his dogs quickly to draw the thoughts away but noticed all of them huddled in a circle sniffing the ground. At first, he thought it might be a dead animal they had found or dragged out from somewhere, but as he trudged down the steps of his porch and shooed them away, he quickly realized that was not the case.

His dogs are sniffing hoof prints. Large hoof prints. Will furrowed his brows as he stared at them. A deer had never gotten this close to his house before. They had stood in the field in groups, but none dared to get so close.

"Shoo, get!" Will scrambled his dogs away from the prints as he crouched down to look at them. His eyes trailed them walking around his home, and he got back up before he began to follow them slowly. They tracked around his house to the back, and he felt his skin crawl as he got to the side of his house. The prints had suddenly stopped by the window; the snow kicked up and scuffled around. It was the same window when staring in one could see directly to Will's bed and living room. Will felt his blood go cold and his mouth go dry as he stared down at the hoof prints then looked back to his window, and then back down. Will quickly noticed how odd the prints looked, something he didn't catch before. no only were they unusually big, but they also only seemed to come in two pairs instead of four. Whatever it was, it was watching on two feet.

Will backed up, looking around frantically before he ripped on his own heels and landed on his butt. His heart had leaped into his throat as he sweat through his jacket. How long had this thing been watching him? The window was seven feet off of the floor, not even he could looking it without standing on his heels, and even then he could barely see in. Will's paranoia set in and he stumbled up. He ran back around to the front of his house, heading his dogs together as he counted them off. The then ushering them back inside. There would be no walk today.

Will slammed his door shut and locked it before he ran around his home and shut the curtains on the first floor. He made sure all of them were locked, and checked the back door that usually was unlocked. His dogs watched hum in confusion, their heads cocked to the side as they whimpered at their owners erratic behavior.

Will got changed into a new pair of clothes hurriedly, stumbling and hopping as he pulled his pants up to his waist. He grabbed his belt and gun before holstered it. He ran to the door and threw on his coat before he went back outside. Will shut the door and locked it behind him with his keys before he finally took a breath. He knew what he needed to do. He had to convince himself what he saw was fake. Or real. He reluctantly followed his path back into the woods. The path was easy to remember, he could still see the marks from where Buster and himself had ran off. Will had gone into the woods, that he was sure of now. That was not a dream.

His breathing was shaky as he exhaled from his pursed lips, stumbling in the soft snow. He was barely able to walk. His knees ached, his whole body groaned from standing for so long. That little nap hadn't helped much.

Carefully, he entered the woods.

the forrest seemed more alive than last night. The wind and trees, the crickets, everything seemed more animated. The sun shined through the sprawling branches in pockets, guiding Will deeper into the woods. He continued, whipping around every time he thought he saw or heard something, but it was only the trees. Just the trees.

Will paused for a moment, putting his hand against a tree and leaning over to catch his breath. Will had faced many horrors in his time working with the FBI. He's had a gun pointed at his head, been shot at, stabbed, he's stared off with the worst killers imaginable, seen the worst side of humanity, yet nothing came close to the fear he felt standing alone in the woods. His entire body trembled with adrenaline and no matter how hard he tried he couldn't get his knees to stop shaking.

"Calm down..." he breathed, "it's not real. It's not..."

Will slumped against the tree, looking around as he panted heavily.

"It's just a bad dream." he whispered, his eyes scanning the woods. His head became too full to think. "Bad dream." He let out a nervous chuckle, putting his head in his hands. He took a deep breath, sitting upright as he pulled himself together.

Will forced himself to stand back up, wiping his pants of snow before he continued to walk calmly.

"Just a dream. it *had* to just be a dream." he told himself, "I had to...I had to just-"

Will broke through the woods into the clearing. He looked up, and to his horror, the deer corpse was still there. All the convincing he had tried to do rushed out of his body like a sliced artery stilling out to his feet. He had trouble keeping himself up, but he slowly moved towards the corpse, the tree standing in the middle seeming ever ominous. Blood was frozen

around the corpse as he stared down at it. The stag's eyes were wide with shock, its last moments forever frozen on its stiff face. The entire corpse was frozen over, but that didn't stop Will from bending down and pulling the teared flaps of skin back to look inside it's body. He felt the blood leave his body, and the mouth-water sensation of vomit in the back of his throat rising. He fell back dizzily as he repeated a string of "no." The organs were missing. The heart, kidney, and liver. They were all missing.

Will looked around as the bone chilling feeling of someone's eyes on him befell him. He couldn't make up in his rational mind if he had done it to himself, if he had freaked himself out enough to believe that something was now watching him, or if maybe, just maybe that thing had waited for his arrival from deep in the woods like a wolf-- not like a wolf, not like any predator Will ever knew. This was something else. The beast was real after all. It had to be.

Will stared at the corpse, wondering if the stag felt the same way he did when it saw the creature. Did it try to run or was it frozen into place, knowing that its fate was sealed from the moment their eyes met?

Will didn't know what to do with this knowledge. Nobody would believe him. Alana wouldn't, Jack wouldn't, the city wouldn't, the *world* wouldn't. A *Wendigo* roaming the woods and killing people? It was going to land him in a ward. There was no way he could tell anyone, at least not anyone he was friendly with He needed to find someone who might understand.

After gaining enough courage to stand, he ran as fast as his sore legs could take him out of the woods, stumbling over snow and hidden roots. He broke through the tree line, galloping towards his home. He hide solid ground and took off as if the Beast was following right on his tail. he could hear his dogs barking wildly from inside at their owner's distress. He threw himself against his door, fumbling iwht his keys before he unlocked the door and threw himself inside. Will slammed the door shut, locking it behind him as he braced for something to hit the door, but nothing did.

For moment he felt safe; his hands sliding off the door as he panted. He tossing his gun onto a cabinet nearby in frustration. Will rubbed at his frozen face, but the image of the beast was burned into his brain behind his eyes. He went to his laptop and opened it back up. He logged in and the image of Freddie Lounds' article remained glued to his screen. Will stared at the article, a feeling of disgust rising in his chest. He took a deep breath, kicking himself for what he was about to do:

"Hello, this is Freddie Lounds speaking." Her eager voice came through the other line, cold and snide.

"I wanted to speak with you, Freddie."

"I'm sorry, who is this?" She asked.

Will gritted his test, closing his eyes before he spoke again: "Will Graham."

There was a pause, and he thought he heard her scoff on the other line.

"Will Graham," she sighed, "always nice to hear from you." He could hear the pride in her throat.

"I need to talk to you about your article. Your recent one." He explained.

"You mean the Wendigo one? interesting, right? Never heard of such a thing until I talked to some natives--"

"Can we meet?" He asked.

Freddie paused as the gears turned in her head.

"In person?" she asked. She repeated with genuine shock.

"Yes, Freddie." he said through clenched teeth.

"Must be serious....—" she leaned back in her chair, the old metal creaking, "Is Jack Crawford involved?"

Will took a deep breath. "No. Just me and you."

She paused again, choosing her words carefully as she drummed her fingers on her apartment desk."Is it about the recent murders then?"

"Yes."

"Snippy. Well, if you're willing to give me an interview about the cases...I'm sure we can find a nice spot to work things out." She replied with a smile.

Will looked up at the ceiling, cursing whatever god looked down on him.

"I don't have a lot of useful information for you, Freddie."

"Better than nothing I think. It's a hot topic right now, you know. And I'm well aware the FBI doesn't think it's a rabid animal."

Will didn't try to argue. somehow, she always ended up on top. He deflated as he leaned back in his seat. "Can you meet now?" He diverted.

"Right now?" She seemed surprised.

"Right now."

"Reese's cafè sound good then? I'm more comfortable if it's a public area." Will rolled his eyes.

"Fine by me. Be there in an hour."

"Of course."

Will hung up on her, it was done.

He picked up his keys and headed out to his car, starting it up as he took off down the icy roads back into Baltimore City. It would take him a hour to get to the cafe.

Will parked right in front of the coffee shop, seeing Freddie was already inside with her laptop under her nose and a coffee by her side. The one thing he did appreciate was her dedication. He got out of his car, shutting the door and making eye contact with the flaming haired Freddie Lounds as he started inside. It was as if she could smell his presences. Will opened the glass door, the bell going off, and Freddie stood up, smiling cheekily at him.

“Nice to see you, Mr. Graham.” She held out her hand.

“Can’t say I feel the same way.” He grunted before he took a seat across from her.

Freddie slowly sat back down, intertwining her gloved hands together.

“What did you want to talk about so badly that you had to contact me?” She asked. "Must've been desperate."

Will chuckled bitterly. ”Tell me about the article you did on the Wendigo.”

She raised her brows, “The mythical creature some hunter said he saw?”

“Yes.” He sighed.

“Is the FBI really getting so stuck that they’re turning to folk tales?” Will rolled his eyes.

“Just tell me about the article.”

"You read it, didn't you?"

"You do this thing where you like to leave out crucial details, Freddie." He pointed out.

Freddie sighed and shrugged “He seemed shaken up, truly believed what he saw that’s for sure.”

Will's eyes fell into deep thought as he stared at the wooden table. he squeezed his hands together, his face pensive and tense. Freddie cocked her head at him, her brows furrowing before she slowly started to smile.

She leaned back, “You look a bit pale, Will." she pointed out before Will looked up at her "You've seen something too, haven't you”

“Who is the man?” Will asked, ignoring her comment.

"I can’t tell you that. He didn’t let me use his name.”

"Well, I’m not asking you to publish the man’s name. I’m asking you to tell *me.*”

She paused. “What did you see?” Freddie asked.

Will stared at her, not answering for a moment before he slowly leaned forward, folding his arms on the table.

”Do you believe that man?” He asked lowly. She turned her head to the side, eyeing Will cautiously.

“I believe him, but I don’t believe that it was a *Wendigo,* if that’s what you’re asking.” Will leaned back again and exhaled.

“What do you think it is?” He asked.

She took out her little recording box, setting it in the middle of the table with a smile.”Why don’t you tell me, what *you* think it is, Mr. Graham?” Will glared at her.

"I don’t know what it is.”

“Is it some sort of animal?” She asked.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. Freddie stared at him, edging him on. Will let out a sigh as he deflated. “The...gore was, although savage, still purposeful in the way that certain organs had been ripped out and taken.“ He took a deep breath, “No wolf or bear rips out specific organs and eats them.” He said snidely.

“Organs were taken?"

"Yes. It's something we kept out of the press."

So the gore, as you put it, was only to get to the organs?”

"That's what we think.”

"Could it be a person then?” She asked.

"A person would have to have....some sort of claw to dig that deep into the skin to retrieve the organs.” She furrowed her brows, suddenly more interested in the case.

“So if it’s not a person and not an animal, what could it be?”

"We’re ruling out any obvious suspects, but it seems the evidence is pointing more toward...a person rather than an animal. The murders are just...too complex.”

"So is it possible we have a...savage cannibal on our hands?”

"I don't know.”

“Do you believe that it could possibly be the Wendigo?” She asked abruptly, and rather patronizingly. Will glared at her, staying quiet for a moment as he tried to choose his words carefully.

"The Wendigo is a Native American folk tale. We're searching for something a little more...grounding."

"You say "we" but I'm asking you more personally." she pushed

"Anything could be possible." He raised his head, "If it was a person or a...cult of people, we would have been able to track where they came from."

"You think it's a cult of cannibals?"

"Personally, no." Everything out of Will's mouth leaked of sarcasm. Freddie sighed and paused the recording.

"What did you see in the woods, Will? Honestly."

"What's the man's name?" He retorted. Freddie leaned back and crossed her arms. She hesitated briefly, "I'll tell you what I saw if you give me his name." He offered.

They stared each other down. Both of them unwavering until Freddie sighed and uncrossed her arms. "His name is Elias Perch. He's a hunter just outside of Baltimore, closer to you than the FBI. I can give you his address." Will leaned forward and nodded, and Freddie wrote it down on a napkin and handed it to him. "Now what did you see?" She asked.

"Something I can't bring myself to believe just yet." He replied.

Freddie furrowed her brows as Will stood up. "I don't recommend going into the woods alone for a photo shoot, Freddie." He called back, "I don't think it likes the rude."

# Story Tellers

Will took the address and punched it into his address. He was indeed on the line between Pennsylvania and Maryland, about an hour out. The sun was high up in the sky, it would only start to go down from now on. Will followed through with the address and arrived at a small reclusive cabin. He almost laughed to himself about how similar it looked to one of his old homes. He parked his car and got out before slamming his door as a way to announce his arrival. He realized quickly how dead the house looked. the wood was old and rotting in some places, the grass had grown up and around the house, and the porch was filled with old miscellaneous items. Even more concerning, all the windows were drawn, and all the lights seemed to be turned off. Will slowly walked up to the door before knocking firmly.

There was a silence on the other side, and Will raised his fist to knock again before he heard shuffling and creaking wood planks from inside.

“Who is it!?” A male voice barked from behind the door.

“My name’s Will Graham I have a few questions I’d like to ask you.” Will called back.

He heard the sound of multiple locks being undone before the door was yanked open slightly, held close by a deadbolt. Will was met with a wild-looking man. He had sunken brown eyes that were wide and scared and a long brown beard. He looked like he hadn’t slept in weeks as dark circles lay under his eyes and his hair stuck out all over the place under a winter hat. The man looked past him, his eyes quickly scanning the woods before turning back to him.

"You alone?" He croaked in a country accent.

"Yes sir." Will replied.

"You’re that FBI guy aren’t you?” He asked.

"Special agent." Will replied as he realized he did in fact read Tattlecrime. He began to doubt the man's recollection. "Are you Elias Perch?” He asked

"I ain’t got nothing for you.” Elias said quickly.

Will took a deep breath.

“I’m not a crazy man," Elias hissed, "I done know what I saw! I know it! I wasn’t dreamin’ or nothin’. I ain’t gonna be patronized by some Rinky-dink profiler either, so you can take you fancy ass and get back into—”

“I believe you.” Will stated.

The man stopped, and blinked a few times, unsure if he heard the agent correctly.

"What?“ He whispered.

“I believe you.” Will said again, “And...I have reason to believe that you and I saw the same thing.”

Elias stared at him for a long while as he tried to determine whether or not Will was lying to him, but by the look in Will's eyes he knew. He saw the same exhaustion, the same primal fear. The man swallowed hard and nodded, opening the door and motioning him inside. Will walked in, and the man shut it, locking everything before he walked into his kitchen.

The house was in disarray. books were riddled all over the house, and the only light came from a few dim lanterns placed throughout the house. rifles littered the countertop, there was one by the front door, one on the coffee table in the living room, and one just sitting on the dining room table. He noticed there were no pictures either, no family, no nothing. Just a man going crazy in his cabin.

"Coffee?” Perch asked warily.

"Sure.” Will slowly sat down on the loaded couch by a going fireplace. He waited as the man came back with two warm cups of coffee. “Thank you”

"You really meant it, didn’t you? That you saw the thing.” Elias mentioned as he pulled a lone chair from the dining room into the living room and sat across from Will.

Will nodded.

“I see it in your eyes, the confusion. The fear. Wanted to make sure you done seen what you did, huh?” He leaned back.

“Yes.”

"I'm guessing' you found me through the tabloid journalist, Freddie Lounds huh?” Will nodded again.

"She’s not going to publish your name, I just asked her for it.” Will assured him.

Elias was silent for a moment, staring off into the crackling fire as he gently spun the cup of coffee in his head "What’d you see?” Elias asked, his eyes still fixed on the fire.

Will took a deep breath.

“A big...black humanoid figure with...branching antlers coming out of its head. Its body was long and...lean like it didn’t have any muscle. Just skin and bone. Everything was sunken in, it was like... staring at a void.”

"You see the white eyes?” The man asked quickly.

"I saw them.” Will said quietly, “It...spoke to me.”

The man’s eyes widened.

“It said 'hi.' But...in my voice.” He finished. Will noticed the man gripping his cup tighter, his knuckles turning white.

"I heard it speak too," the man revealed, "didn’t mention it to the lady because she’d think I’m really insane.” He chuckled, “It spoke in my daughter’s voice. I took her hunting a few times in the woods before these killings happened. Stopped after the second one. She was even with me that week, sleepin' in her bed, but I thought she got lost. I followed after it thinkin' she was in trouble but I could-” He stopped himself, a shiver rolling through his body.

"Never seem to get closer.” Will finished. The man nodded, “It barked like my dog.” He added.

Both of them chuckled nervously.

“When I got closer I realized that it was um...off.” Will murmured before taking a sip from his black coffee.

"Yeah, like it can’t quite get it right. That’s what done drove me away from it.” Elias agreed, "Sounded like an old record player."

Will thought about his description, and the more he thought about it, the more it made sense. It did sound robotic, scratchy like a record. Never quite right once you hear it over.

"Did it attack you?” Will asked

"Tried to. Stared me down. Aimed my gun at it and fired. I missed my shot because I was shaking so damn much and it was moving too fast. Think I got it mad...Started runnin’ at me so I started runnin’ too. I wasn’t too deep in the woods, so it stopped once I got into the clearing. Stared at me from the tree lines. I don't think I've slept a wink since.” He murmured before shifting uncomfortably. "I...I still hear it sometimes at night, I think. Stalkin' around like a cat. It claws at my home, knocks on my windows. It knows I ain't sleepin'.

“You said you had a daughter?” Will asked.

" I sent her off to her mother’s. It ain’t safe here no more. Not for her.” Elias leaned back, sipping his coffee, “What about you?”

“No I...I don't have any kids, but my dogs noticed it before I did. All of them were...off. One of my dogs got out so I followed him. The voice got me to go into the woods, and I came across an uh...stag corpse. I found my dog there but...the thing barked again. That’s when I knew it wasn’t a dog.” Will took a deep breath, “It came at me— not like a rush or anything, but it slowly...crawled at me. I didn’t have a gun so I just....knelt down with it and prayed.”

The man furrowed his brows obviously confused by his words.

“It touched me how a human would touch another human, but it got scared off after someone I knew came into the woods looking for me.”

"Damn lucky to be alive.” Elias murmured.

“I know.” Will scoffed, “I’m still not sure what I saw was entirely real. I had to go back to the spot to make sure.”

"We saw it. Ain't no question about that.”

"I don’t know what I’m supposed to tell the FBI.” Will murmured, "I can't just say I saw a...beast."

"They ain't never gonna believe us, Mr. Graham. Not now, not ever. Just like everyone else who sees that thing, ain't no one gonna be in the loop but us. We just gotta let this case go cold, and become a myth." Elias paused, glancing at the gun on the coffee table separating them, "Unless someone kills the sonofabitch and brings back its corpse.”

Will looked at him alarmed. He didn’t want to kill the creature. It was the first thought that came to his mind. He was curious about it, he didn't want it dead, but he knew Elias had a point. It was killing people.

“I-It only attacks if you attack it first.” Will pointed out “It’s more...curious than anything.”

” It’s an abomination to God.” Perch grunted, “It needs to be hunted and killed. Even if you FBI guys cover it up. You gotta kill it.”

Will sighed faintly.

“I think we should try to understand, just killing it would be...a waste.”

“It's killed enough people. Don’t need another body to drop just for some damn science.” He downed his coffee like a shot and set it on the table in front of them. “The only reason you didn’t die was because it got a little snack before you arrived. You would have been a dead man otherwise.”

Will settled into the sofa. He never thought about that He never considered that the creature had eaten just before he had arrived. He knew that Elias was most likely right.

They avoided each other’s eyes, spacing off as they remembered their vastly different experiences. One man is driven by his bizarre curiosity, and the other is driven by pure fear.

Suddenly, the sound of a phone ringing in Will's pocket cut through the thick ambiance. Will cleared his throat as he dug into his pocket, picking up the call before standing.

"Hello?” Will asked.

"Will, it’s Jack.”

"Don’t tell me there’s another body...” Will said under his breath as he glanced at Elias.

“Could have been" Jack recalled, "A man called saying he saw some sort of man-eating a deer. Wouldn’t give much detail other than that, but I need you to come down here and confirm that the killing of this fuckin' deer was the same as the rest of them-- and that this guy is sane.”

"You should be able to confirm it yourself, shouldn’t you?” Will asked.

"We’re being thorough, Will. I’ll send you the location. Be there ASAP.” Jack hung up, and Will turned to Elias.

“Seems like we aren’t the only ones who saw it anymore.”

# A New Trail

Will left Elias Perch's home, bidding him farewell before he got into his car and traveled over the twenty miles out to the location Jack sent him.

There was a certain uneasy peace that befell Will. The knowledge that someone else has seen what he saw, felt the terror that he felt. It was comforting. Still, the idea that what he saw was real, that a beast so great, so capable of unspeakable violence, dwelled in those woods, in many woods, made his bones cold. If it was better than it being a person, Will didn't know.

When the detective arrived he noticed Alana's car was on the scene. He got out with uncertainty, shutting his car door as he tucked his keys into his pocket. As he walked up, he immensely felt the tension from Jack Crawford's face. It was tight, his jaw clenched, eyes squinting and brows narrowed. He seemed annoyed.

The area Jack sent him to wasn't at all like the other woody areas. It was in a neighborhood. A *neighborhood.* However, Will did notice the trees that were littered in the backyard. It would be good cover for it. He walked over to Jack, climbing the stairs to the porch.

"What is it?" Will asked.

"Based on what we were told..." he started before reaching a tired hand up to his face and pinched the bridge of his nose with squeezed eyes. "a black...humanoid figure." Jack finished sarcastically, "Like the Freddie Lounds article."

Will let out a soft sigh.

"Why's Alana here?" He inquired.

"Psychoanalysis. Making sure this guy isn't some schizo and is just wasting our time."

Will shifted, looking towards the road as neighbors peered out of their homes and people stopped their evening walks to gaze at the scene.

"Do you believe him?" Will asked slowly, his eyes unable to meet Jack's.

"No, I don't believe him." Jack stated matter-of-factly. "He's saying it's some sort of weird beast. Do I look like I believe that?" the aggravation in Jack's voice was more than noticeable. "Even if it was some other species of animal we don't know about, I can't take that to the Bureau." Jack put his hands in his pockets, staring out onto the road like Will had, his face twisted pensively. He took a deep breath before he turned his head back towards Will.

"Are you sure it's not an animal?" He pushed, squinting at Will as he dipped his head down.

"I'm not sure of anything anymore..." Will admitted rather vaguely. His eyes shifted.

Just then, Alana came back outside, shutting the door behind her with a puzzled expression.

He seems sane. No history of serious mental illness, not taking any medications, drugs. If anything, what he saw definitely shook him up, but he's telling the truth."

"Could it have been his imagination?" Jack asked.

"He's pretty adamant about what he saw." She sighed, "But that's what I was thinking."

They stood in silence for a moment. Will's eyes were fixed on the freshly painted wooden planks as thoughts ran around his head.

"Can I talk to him?" Will asked suddenly, "Alone."

Alana and Jack glanced at one another in confusion. If anyone knew Will Graham, they would know talking was at the bottom of his list.

"Just for a reference. I mean there are other accounts of what this thing is. If it matches up with the other witnesses it could be something."

"Or, he read a Freddie Lounds article and let it mess with his imagination." Jack pointed out.

"Just let me talk to him." Will said.

He pushed past Jack and Alana before opening the front door to the home. It was well organized, the wooden floors were polished and clean, and pictures of families hung from the white walls. Sitting at the dining room table was a disheveled man. He had on a white button-down, his black tie hanging loosely around his neck as his black pants were buckled with a dark belt. His blonde hair once swept back was falling over his face. His white, knuckled hands clutched a cold mug as his eyes stared back at Will pleadingly. He looked normal.

Will pursed his lips inwards to a faint smile before approaching him slowly.

"My name's Will Graham--"

"I already did my screening." The man told him.

"That's...not why I'm talking to you." Will put his hands into his pockets, "Can you describe to me what you saw?"

The man sighed, leaning back in his seat before glancing at the ceiling. He took a moment as if to calm himself before slowly tilting his head back down to look at Will "It looked like a person." he started, "I thought it was a person, but...when it stood up I...I didn't know what it was. It was just black, blacker than a shadow. I could see white eyes. I mean the whole thing was white like...like dead people when their eyes cloud over, it looked like that. And it...had antlers, like a stag. they were black too." the man was visibly uncomfortable, shifting in his seat as the memory of the beast was burned into his brain like a hot iron.

Will nodded in understanding.

“Did it see you?” He asked.

"I saw it first, it was eating the poor animal through my window in my backyard. I-I thought it was a person, so I went outside with my shotgun just in case.” Will’s heart sank. “It looked at me and started to stand up so I...shot it twice. It made some sort of gurgling noise before it screamed. I mean...I think it screamed. I don't know how else to describe it. It was a shriek like...I-I've never heard anything like it. Then it just...ran off.”

“You shot it?” Will asked urgently.

"Of course I did!” The man shot back. WIll paused.

“Can you take us to where you saw it?"

"I mean...I was still in my home. I haven't gone outside since. Only if you all come with me, I'm not going back with only one person.” Will nodded and the man got up and he followed Will back to the front door. He opened the door to Jack and Alana.

"He said he’d show us the spot where he saw the thing.” Will mentioned before the man got outside.

“Jesus...” Jack murmured.

"You said you wanted to be thorough, let’s be thorough.”

Jack, Will, and Alana followed the man through the house to the black sliding glass door. They went outside in the backyard, The man clutching his shotgun firmly as he trudged through the grass.

“Will,” Jack put a hand against Will’s chest to stop him, “I need you to take this seriously.”

Will narrowed his brows.

”What?”

"I don’t want you digging into this folk tale, whatever it is. No monster talk or whatever Freddie called it. Our best bet is that it's a person or a group of people. Understand? Don’t go around and tell people otherwise. ” Will went to protest but then shut his mouth. He knew better.

"I know.” He said.

“Good.” They caught up with Alana and the man, and the man stopped pointing into the woods.

“There.” The man said shakily. “Saw it right over there. Behind that tree.” Jack didn’t hesitate to start walking into the woods, starting in the direction o the man’s finger. Will glanced at the man, then followed after as Alana stayed back with the homeowner.

There was a deer alright, gored like the rest, but something else remained.

"What the fuck is that?” Jack asked.

Will looked over to what Jack was staring at: a pool of black, shiny liquid trailing into the woods. Some of it even hardened on trees as if it had planted its hand on them. Jack knelt down to the floor where the glossy liquid stained the green grass.

"He did say he shot it twice.” Will mentioned slowly. Jack looked up at him, now just as unsure.

"What is it? Old blood?" asked Jack.

"Too dark to be." Will replied. It looked like ink.

"Jak took out his phone, calling in a forensic team as he stood back up.

Will turned back to the pool of what he assumed to be blood. He walked back through the woods to the man, leaving Jack on the phone.

"Where did you shoot it?” Will asked.

"I think I got it in the shoulder and chest, maybe the side.” The man’s eyes darted around, and he shuffled in place, too afraid to stay still as if there were eyes watching him in every direction. "Did I kill it?"

"No. I don't think so, but you injured it."

"So...I found something. something was actually there?" the man exclaimed, not knowing if he felt better about the idea that something was actually there.

“Well, you found something. That’s for sure.”

# The Awakening

Will drove home with the radio low, focusing on his own thoughts as they ran ramped in his head. He didn't want to stick around to see the forensic team gawk at the inky blood on the floor. He knew what it was. Will was more worried about the beast than he was about the actual victims. It was injured, probably bleeding out in the woods all alone. It could be scared. He needed to find it before someone else did, and he had a feeling he knew where it was going to be.

As night fell, he knew Alana was going to come visit him. His absence during the investigation was odd. Usually Will stuck around for the whole time because: what else was he going to do? He had much more curiosity for cases than his peers, he watched like an observer, picking up every detail. Without Will. they'd miss something.

Will waited for Alana to make her nightly checkup, sitting on his porch as his dogs sniffed around outside. It wasn't long before he saw the headlights of Alana's hybrid roll up his yard, and park a bit away from his house in the dirt. his dog ran over as she got out, dusting her dress off before she smiled and pet each one of his six dogs as they crowded around her like sheep. Will took a sip from his glass of whiskey as she approached.

"Hiya.” She called from the gravel before closing her coat around her tightly in the cold.

"Hi.” He replied, stopping his rocking in his chair. "Did they figure out what that stuff was?” Will asked.

"Not yet." Alana replied. "Everyone at the forensic unit is...perplexed. They have no idea what sort of animal would leave black blood."

Will took another sip from his eyes as he stared at her. "I wouldn't be surprised if they tried to cover this one up." he said. "Even Jack seems stuck.” Alana agreed, "I've never seen him scowl so hard at a piece of evidence."

"Jack's been stuck for a while." Will replied rather plainly.

His serenity spooked Alana. She stopped by the foot of his stairs eyeing him up and down. “You seem unbothered.” She noted.

“Oh, I’m bothered.” Will reassured her as he raised his brows and smiled limply, “I’m um....pretty worried actually.” He glanced into his cup.

"About what this thing could be? Or something else.” Will looked at her, “You were more concerned about where the thing was shot rather than the fact that this could be...inhuman.”

Will leaned back in his chair, the old wood creaking under his weight.

"If it’s an animal of some sort, it’s injured right now.” He stated with no particular inflection.

Alana and Will stared at one another, a stiffness in the air that only unsettled one of them. Will's eyes were looking at Alana, but not *seeing* her. His mind had drifted somewhere else as he put the glass to his lips again.

"What did you see that night in the woods, Will?" she asked.

Will didn't reply.

"Was it the same thing everyone's talking about?"

Will shifted, his eyes glancing back toward the eerie woods.

"No." he lied, "I'm saying it's an animal, not some creature. It...lives and breaths just like you and I do." Alana searched his face, but Will closed her off.

"You said you were sure it wasn't any sort of animal." She pointed out, "You were sure of it."

"Well, maybe I was wrong." Will replied in a high-pitched whisper.

"We'll find something eventually."

She glanced into the woods, then at him again.

"You're not planning on going back into the woods are you?" She asked in a wavering voice

Will shook his head.

"That would make me seem...crazy." he said before a half-hearted chuckle escaped his throat.

It was waiting for him.

"I would have to agree." Alana said, her tone mimicking a warning as she raised her brows at Will.

They stood in silence, a light wind brushing through them that chilled through their coats. The night was much colder than usual. A blizzard was going to come soon, or at least a storm.

"It's pretty late." Will said

"Yeah," she stepped back, "I should gonna get going."

Will nodded in agreement.

"Drive safe." He said.

Alana nodded and headed turned around on her. He watched her leave before glancing back into the woods. He waited until he heard her car leave, and the sound of tires on the dirt road disappeared. Waiting until he was left in darkness once again.

Will got up, walked inside, and grabbed a bag that was hiding just behind his door. He didn't think to take a gun or a knife or any sort of weapon as he walked down his front steps. He traversed back into the woods and snow following his path from before that was now hidden under the snow. He picked up his pace a feeling of built-up pressure weighing heavy in his chest with each step. He felt as if he knew exactly what the creature was feeling, what it was doing, how it was breathing; feeling its pain as he got further into the woods. He didn't understand why he wanted to help it so much. As far as he knew this thing would be waiting to kill him, to eat him alive. It slashed and tore everything else it came across, why was it leaving Will alone?

Will got through the heavy snow, reaching the more woody part of the forest as sticks and twigs snapped and crushed beneath his snow-covered feet. He saw the clearing up ahead, his heart thundering in his chest. He could feel his heart squeezing, pushing blood through his pulsing veins. He broke through the last line of trees into the clearing, panting as he held the bag loosely in his hand.

It was there. Waiting

The beast was laying against the only tree in the clearing, turned on its side.

“Hi.” Will called out softly. Its reflexes weren’t as strong as it slowly looked at him.

"Hi.” It reverberated back in his voice again.

Will slowly walked towards it and it sat up more as if it was trying to move away.

"I-I’m going to help you.” He called, holding up the bag he brought.

The being didn’t move as he got closer, seemingly comforted by his presence. Its eyes were still glazed in a milky white, unblinking as it traced over Will. The human slowly reached the beast, taking out a flashlight and shining it on its body. He watched the creature’s chest heave, a hollow sound coming from its throat. Its skin shimmered with the blood that trailed down its side and shoulder. It was sitting in a pool of black.

Will opened the bag and took out a white rag. He dabbed its shoulder, cleaning the blood away. It was the same consistency as slightly stale syrup and stained the rag a pitch black. Will kept glancing at the creature and it stared back curiously, not fully understanding what Will was doing, but vaguely aware.

Will managed to wipe away the blood, seeing a glistening wound underneath all the stale blackness. It almost sparkled under the light. The wound was thick like honey, but it seemed to have stopped bleeding.

The beast shifted quickly bluffing him as Will jumped a bit and looked to it. He scoffed as he realized it had moved to scare him on purpose. It wanted to watch his reaction. the creature let out a torn, awkward laugh.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!"

"Well, that wasn’t very nice.” Will murmured.

“Hi.” It grunted again in an unfamiliar voice.

Will sat down on his but, staring at the creature. He thought the beast was beautiful. How it stayed still under the moonlight, breathing like it was wearing a thick mask. Its skin was unbothered by the cold, icy to the touch. The beast tilted its head at Will inquisitively before it slowly began to sit up off the tree. Will didn’t move as it inched towards his face, putting its hands on the cold floor beside Will. It got into his face again, its breath was cold and rancid with rotting flesh on Will's skin.

The close proximity made his heart thump and flutter in his chest. A weird sensation rose in his body, turning him hot and flustered as his body broke out in a sweat. He closed his eyes, a mixture of fear and arousal rising in him. It was weird to feel such a thing as it breathed down his neck. He was confused for a moment, wondering how his body could react in such a way. He was in danger, real danger, but all he could do was freeze up and squeeze his legs together. The beast leaned into his neck, inhaling deeply as his scent filled its lungs. Will felt a shiver run down his spine as a soft gasp escaped his lips that seemed to amuse the creature.

It placed its arm behind Will as it loomed over him. It was trying to get him on his back. Will slowly followed the silent demand, resting his head against the snow as he stared into its milky white eyes. they looked like stars. The cold rose up through his jacket as the snow enveloped his back. The beast stared at him, studying his face before it touched his neck. Its large claw was bigger than his head. He could feel its sharp ends ding into his tender flesh. It used its long, spindly nails to drag them down his neck and leave fine, red lines. It caught on Will’s shirt and it seemed bothered by the material, huffing like a horse as it stared down at his shirt. Will silently stared up at the creature as he tried to enter its mind. It was terrifying, having it loom over him so closely, but they felt so closed. Will slowly started to sit up, the creature allowing him to as it moved up with him.

Will looked down at his shirt and sighed shakily before he started to take off his coat slowly. He didn't want to move too quickly. He slowly unbutton his shirt, his heart beating out of his chest as he slowly slid his shirt off his shoulders. The cold breeze hit his skin, icing it almost immediately as Will shivered under the moonlight.

The creature huffed and moved off of him. Both of them slowly started standing up. They matched each other's movements the beast mimicked Will and Will mimicked it as they watched one another carefully. Will stared at the creature and looked down at its waist, it was still tar, black like the rest of its body, thin and frail looking. He glanced again and was shocked and slightly horrified to see an opening appear on its waist. It was like a shell had opened up to the side and a long, tentacle-like organ slid out. It was large.

Will froze, his body turning stiff. His eyes were as big as plates before he met its eyes again.

"What?" he whispered.

It bowed its head at him, another huff escaping its throat as he crouched down on its hands and feet its long crooked knees pointed up at the sky. It tilted its head slowly. Beckoning.

Will swallowed dryly before he pushed his thumbs into his hands and slid off his pants and boxers hearing them fall against the snow before he carefully stepped out of them. It was freezing outside.

The creature moved closer to him.

Will hugged himself reluctantly, half out of fear, and half freezing. He was just as nude as the being, but his skin could not handle the cold.

It began to circle him attentively, walking in a spiral as it got closer with each step closing in. Will watched it, standing still, not bothering to turn around to keep his eyes on the beast. He felt where he was, he felt its eyes piercing into him hungrily. It stopped directly behind him. Will held his breath as he listened to the sound of his own anxious breathing and nothing more. Its shadow enveloped his own.

Then it touched him. The sudden shock of the beast's hands slithering hastily in under his arms, grabbing his chest as it started to roar from behind him. Will winced as its piercing claws began to push into his fragile skin, cutting into his flesh. He gasped and heaved at the cold touch, putting his hands over the being's arms as he groaned slightly as it dug. The hands covered him from waist to just under his chest, the claws like large stakes threatening to tear him open.

His mind was racing, full of darkened thoughts he shared with the beast as if their minds were starting to meld as it influenced Will's consciousness.

*Tear me apart, tear my vessel to pieces, and gorge on my flesh. Rip me open and make me bleed as you feast on my body only. I want to feel the warmth of my blood raining down on my face and body, I want to see you in your glory. Devour me, devour me!*

Will's eyes flew open, staring up at the full moon, the stars twinkling above him. His breath fogged in the air, giving the sky a misty effect as the beast held him, a low grumbling emanating from its throat. His thoughts were not his own.

Will could feel droplets of warm blood trailing down his chest onto his thighs from the beast's claws. He felt as if he was stuck in a trance, put under the beast's spell as the only intention stuck in his mind was to be savagely eaten by it. The beast inched his claws down slightly, making a slit in Will's skin as it tore his flesh deeply.

It had almost picked Will up from the floor as he stood on his toes, his back sticking to the entity's chest before he suddenly let go of Will.

Will collapsed to the floor on his hands and knees. His body, already iced over from the cold, was unaffected by the snow beneath him. He turned quickly onto his back, staring as the beast came into his field of view, its head blocking out the moon. Will's eyes fluttered, his breath getting hotter as he stared back at it.

The beast slowly leaned down and grabbed his hips as it squatted, lifting them up into the air with ease as Will slid, his back almost entirely off the floor as it was bringing his hips up to its face.

“W-What are you doing?!—“ Will cried out as his shoulders and head pressed into the snow.

It was then Will realized he had actually gotten hard. The alarming reaction made him grunt in a mixture of horror and fascination. He was so close to being eaten, so close to death himself and he had a hard-on for it? It disturbed him, how could such a thing make him feel so pleased? Who really was he? Will guessed he didn’t really know himself after all.

The beast opened its mouth slowly, revealing its long blank tongue that looked similar to the silly appendage that slithered from its waist. It almost looked sharp and he flinched as the creature's tongue wrapped around his cock, toying with it with its pointed tongue. Will gasped and grabbed at the loose snow as he arched his back. He cried out helplessly as his eyes widened. Its mouth was warm unlike the rest of the body as it took in his cock, its tongue coiled like a snake.

Will shivered as he let out a cry. He closed his eyes as he felt the tip of its tongue squeezing and rubbing his tip. It narrowed itself enough to toy inside the tip of his cock, rattling around the small internal walls. The sensation was unbearable. His cock pulsed with eagerness, but the tip of the beast's tongue was preventing anything from coming out as it dug inside. Will felt as if he was getting closer to breaking his back in two as the stimuli continued to push him to his limit, his muscles tensing and pulling apart as he cried out.

It raised his hips higher up off the floor so his hands dangled inched from the snow. The beast rocked its head the tongue slipping around his cock. It carefully felt his reactions with its claws, gripping his hips tightly as it felt his muscles twisting and straining. It listened to his pathetic whimpers, his soft moans, and grunts as the blood rushed up to his head and the wounds on his chest started dripping blood down to his neck into the pale snow. It was intrigued by his behavior, by his shivering body and pale skin glistening in the moonlight.

“S-Stop..!” Will cried out. He shifted his hips, trying to get free, but whoever he moved, the claw dug deeper into him. Will pushed his hands against his face as tears formed in his eyes, unable to bear the stimulation as its tongue pushed deeper inside of his cock. He pulled one of his feet against the beast's shoulder, trying to push off.

“A-Ah-- Oh fuck!” His voice pitched high, squeaking out of his throat.

The creature tightened its tongue around the tip of his cock, rubbing it smoothly as it coiled them uncoiled. Will’s body convulsed, his toes curled just like his back as he jolted, nearly bending his body in half as the tip of its tongue finally slithered out and squeezed his cock. Will came, howling out into the air as his eyes widened. His voice echoed through the trees, breaking through the silent forest.

All the tension in his body suddenly released. He dropped his hands and let his head hang limply. A soft sigh escaped his lips as the beast slowly lowered his hips back onto the floor. It waited patiently for Will to sit up and slowly, Will pushed himself up, the beast watching him as he moved onto his hands and knees.

Will's lips were blue from the cold, his skin chafed from the whipping, icy wind. He wanted to feel warm, he wanted heat to fill his body and make him burst. Will stood up, still breathing heavily as he started to back up to the tree behind him, the beast followed his

movements, stepping forward as he stepped back until his back hit the tree. The beast exhaled heavily and slowly lowered its head to Will's face. Will raised his head slightly staring down at it as the beast's white eyes stared back. He put his hands on the tree behind him, pressing his back to them before glancing back at him the beast

The beast stood up, grabbing his hips again and pulling him up. Will grabbed at the tree behind him, pushing his back against it before he squeezed his eyes shut, letting out a whimper. He could feel something warm and slimy fidgeting below him, poking and prodding as if it was searching. Suddenly, it seemed to find where it wanted to go and the beast shoved itself inside of him without warning. Will let out a sob, the beautiful sensation of pain and pleasure mixing as his legs shook. His arms clasped around the best, his frail fingers tried to sink into its steely flesh.

The beast thrust into him, its appendage seeming to not stop growing in length as it shot up inside of him filling his stomach. It ravaged Will as he gasped and sputtered defenselessly. Tears flowed from his eyes as he grunted. it was outrageously painful, but he accepted the pain, twisting it into pleasure as a dark awakening began to crack open inside of him. The appendage leaked sticky clear fluid as it thrashed in him. He could feel it hitting his stomach, rattling around inside of him. He thought it was beautiful, he thought the creature was beautiful. He was overwhelmed with joy and satisfaction, the emotion spurring from the beast itself.

Will insides heated the beast's large organ. It twitched and pulsed inside of him as it tore through his walls, rubbing against them rhythmically and excitedly.

Will felt himself spiraling down deeper into the being's darkness. He was afraid that he might turn into the beast himself as he laughed aloud. A pseudo pain jolted to his head as if antlers themselves were branching out.

Will's back tore the bark from the tree as his tears slowly rolled down his face, freezing in the cold. He groaned as the beast filled up his insides with each thrust. He could barely breathe. Something about being pounded against a tree outside with anyone being able to stumble upon them excited him.

This beast could kill him at any moment, it could tear up through him and end his life. His masochistic mind was further pushed by the idea. A part of him he never knew he had, but this beautiful creature was pulling it out of him like a hook in an eye.

The beast dug his nails into Will's thighs before quickly slashing down his chest from one shoulder to hip in excitement. Four long wounds opened up, gushing blood as Will cried out, hanging his head as he watched blood drip onto the white snow. He knew the beast didn't mean to, or maybe it did. It couldn't control itself. Its tongue leaked out, licking the blood ferociously from his chest as if it wanted to contain the large spill.

Will smiled faintly, gasping and breathing audibly as the beast huffed. It planted its hoofs firmly into the floor as it started thrusting deeper and harder, expanding Will's belly. He listened to its heavy breathing through his own weak cries, seeing his stomach rise with it.

The beast grunted and stomped its hoof again before it further pushed inside, hurting Will's insides as it reached a deeper part of his body. The beast then suddenly stopped moving. Will gasped pathetically, wincing as he tried to get his footing onto the snow, feeling his insides being filled with a thick warmth as anything he couldn't hold spurted out. His eyes rolled back into his head, and his legs twitched and curled. Slowly, the beast pulled out of him, the appendage slithering back. It let go as Will fell onto his side, blood spilling from his chest and staining the snow.

His mind and body were mush, he was unable to think or speak, as his vision was blurred and his head spun. He was wheezing, only able to feel the stinging pain in his chest before Will slowly closed his eyes, expecting to die in the snow.

# The Man Behind the Beast

Will woke up on his back, a warm blanket covering his body. He slowly opened his eyes a pain ravaging his body. He noted that it was weird he was sleeping on his back. Will usually slept on his side. As his blurred vision cleared he stared at an unfamiliar red curtain, his head tilted to the side. Slowly, he realized that this was not his house. Will's eyes fluttered. He furrowed his brows and slowly started to sit up being a searing pain overtook his front.

A-Ah...ow.” He grunted groggily. Will furrowed his brows, feeling the tight pain on his torso that tugged at his skin. He looks down and saw white bandages covering his chest snuggly.

"What the hell?" he murmured.

Will slowly started to push himself up, resting his back against the wooden bed frame. It was uncomfortable, and painful to sit up and scrunch his torso.

He looked around the room. It was posh, modern looking. There were a pair of golden antlers hanging on the wall in front of him over a lit fireplace. The fire danced around dimly, the wood crackling and bright red. Will looked around realizing he was alone in the room.

Carefully, Will drew back the sheets. Had he just dreamed everything? Did he sleepwalk into the woods and someone found him and took him in? He slowly got up, his hand resting on his stomach as he hobbled over to a mirror. His skin was clean of dirt, his feet clean, his hands, events he looked down the grime was gone from under his fingernails. Will looked back up into the mirror and was shocked to see two antlers sprouting from his head like leaves. He gasped grabbing at the back of his head as he turned, only to realize nothing was there. Will stopped and slowly looked back into the mirror. They were gone. He had imagined it. Of course. The injured man slowly dug his fingers into the gauze, pulling it off of his body with soft grunts. Underneath were four large gashes that were stitched closed. the wound around it was cleaned, wiped freezing of blood, but his skin was red, bruised. It was unsightly in a way. Will slowly sat back down on the bed, trying not to aggravate or touch his wounds. So it did happen after all. He could still remember everything clearly in his head behind his eyes, and it made him shudder. How much had happened? All of it? Did he pass out from blood loss then? that must've been it. He felt weak, looked pale, he had no energy left in his body

Someone had saved him. Maybe someone found him passed out in the woods. It embarrassed him that perhaps a hunter had come across his frozen, naked body. Will slapped his hand to his face in embarrassment. Slowly, he slip his hand down his face and looked around the room to try and find any of his clothes, but it seemed whoever it was didn’t pick them up. However, on the edge of the large bed, he found a pair of boxer briefs and a red sweater neatly folded together. Knowing that they were for him, Will put on the boxers, leaving the sweater in his hand before he opened the room door.

“H-Hello?” He asked softly. His voice echoed down the hall. It sounded so empty.

“Hello.” A voice responded in kind. It took a moment for Will to recognize it, but it did sound familiar. Suddenly, it hit him. It was the same voice as the beast, low and timbre, but this time it was much clearer. Not as distorted as before. “Come out here.” It called.

Will stood quietly for a moment. He didn't know who he would see, or what he would see. Having no other choice Will slowly followed the voice down a short hallway leading into a large living room. A tall, broad-shouldered man stood by a harpsichord, a cup of coffee in his hand. Will furrowed his brows. There was a familiarity to his face that he couldn't decipher.

The older gentleman’s hair was silver, softly flowing over his brows in a sort of gentle way. He had sunken almond-shaped brown eyes, high cheekbones, and a strong straight nose. His lips had a soft far apart Cupid’s bow that was coloured a rosy red. The man looked well put together for it being so early in the morning— stunning even. He had on a navy-colored satin robe with matching pants, the collar of a grey T-shirt exposed underneath.

The longer Will stared at the man the more he began to match up the beast’s appearance with him. It was uncanny.

Will stepped back, finally realizing who he was.”Y-You’re the—...You’re the beast.” Will said breathlessly.

The man smiled.

"I am the beast.” He confirmed, slowly setting his cup of coffee down on the bench beside him before he clasped his hands together.

“B-But you weren’t— how?” Will furrowed his brows, taking a small step forward to get a better look at him.

"It’s a long story," the man chuckled, "too much time will be lost trying to explain, I'm afraid. However, I find that at times when the moon is high in the sky, on the coldest nights, my own horrific desires flood to the moonlight. I change." The man spoke in riddles, his eyes fixed on Will's every perplexed expression, "I become what I am.”

Will turned his head, still giving off a confused expression.

"You...Change?” He asked.

"I change.” The man confirmed, “Just as you have.”

“You’re telling me I could have just had normal sex with a man than whatever we did out there?” Will said, a slight scoff in his voice.

“Where’s the beauty in that?" the man replied with a smile, "My desires and...horrific tendencies were on display, yet you did not run away. That was the first time in a long time that someone had left me perplexed.”

Will swallowed hard

“It’s a mutual understanding between beast and beauty, one that is deeply complex. You never exchanged a real word with me, only looks of understanding. That’s profound. That's beautiful.” The man whispered.

"I-I...I just wanted to help you.” Will replied.

“Of course you did.”

Will walked over to him cautiously.

“It takes a great amount of empathy to look past the horrors of what I graced you with.”

The man's eyes fell on his wounds, the four long marks that reached Will's hip. He stared at the stitching he performed on Will, “I do have to apologize.” He admitted, “I never meant to hurt you like that. I am sorry...for tainting your flesh so deeply.”

The man reached out and touched his chest softly. Will slowly grasped the man's hand, his skin was warm and soft unlike the beast’s, “What’s your name?” The man asked.

"Will Graham.” He answered, still trying to wrap his head around what happened.

"Will.” He smiled at the name.

"Who are you?” Will asked.

"Well, if you don’t want to continue calling me “the Beast” I guess you could call me Hannibal.”

"Hannibal?” The man nodded in confirmation.

“Wendigo only spawn if they eat a *human’s* flesh. Did you eat someone, Hannibal?” Will asked warily.

“I did.” He answered honestly, “Amongst other things.” He leaned back to take in Will fully with his eyes, “But I could not bring myself to eat you.”

"Why did you eat someone?”

"If I had known what was going to become, I would have still done it. I had to survive, Will.” Hannibal said softly. “Still, I wouldn’t have needed to eat anybody here if they had reacted the way you did. I would have stuck with deer for the night. Tell me, Will, why did you react the way you did?”

"It was...more out of survival and....curiosity.” Will murmured bashfully.

"Mh, pure mindless drive. All humans have a deep sense of curiosity. However, my question is: why did you seduce me?” He asked with a grin.

Will scoffed and shook his head.

"It was hardly seduction on my part.”

Hannibal chuckled, and nodded, realizing the boy was a lot keener than he looked. He had indeed courted with the brown-haired man first, but he was unaware that he would pick up on it so keenly. However, it was hardly something so subtle and open-ended as seduction,

“I did wonder if you would reciprocate. I got a lot more than I expected.” Hannibal admitted.

"You got precisely what you expected.”

"In action, maybe. Not in beauty.” Hannibal leaned in closer to Will, “I could feel your emotions flowing through your blood. The utter pain and fear that drove you to the edge. Your body twisted and curled under your skin, yet you did not stop me, you had begged for more. That is what was beautiful.” He whispered only to Will.

Will stared into his eyes, they were much more readable than the Beasts he knew. Now his emotions were much more transparent.

“I will protect you, Will, in any form I take. I have found my post to which I will hitch my beast to, but will you protect me in return? Will you let me hitch my beast, and will you hold onto the reins no matter how hard they pull? Taming both sides of the fray.”

Will dipped his head low, staring back at the man he felt he knew so well already. He knew exactly how he was going to answer, and the words spilled out before he could put any reason behind them:

“I will.”

“Then I will show you the way of your becoming.”

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